

1994

REFLECTIONS ON CHALLENGES AND PRIORITY ACTIONS

Remarks to the World Bank Workshop on Participatory Development, May 17th -20th 1994 (on May 20th)

If there is one domain in which the English can claim to be maintaining a long historical tradition of being world leaders, it is hypocrisy. Yesterday afternoon I enjoyed four blissful hours of believing that I had escaped the obligation to make these remarks. My bliss was heightened by being able to present my motives as a selfless concern to allow the participatory process proceed unhindered by the prior blueprint of the programme. If you are generous, you will recognise that I was trying to maintain national standards. But alas, the reprieve was not to be.

Let me start with my mother who is 94. I phoned her the other night and she asked me what I had been doing. To keep things simple (because I do not believe in teaching, but in trying to help people to learn), I said "I've been teaching". But my mother doesn't hear quite as well as she did, so she said "what? - speak up" so I repeated "I've been teaching" in a louder voice, and she asked again, "I can't catch you", so I shouted into the telephone, "I've been teaching". "Oh", she said, "preaching!".

The spirit of what I am going to say is neither teaching nor preaching. We are all engaged in a struggle to do less badly and the remarks and the reflections I offer are in the spirit of a common search for solutions.

The first reflection is that the document before us (the fourth draft) is a considerable achievement by the participatory learning group. Much more could have been said. It could have gone further. And perhaps it will. But as it stands it is a substantial achievement. If, duly added to and amended, it is adopted by the Bank's management and implemented, the world will be on a path towards becoming a better place, than it would have been..

In assessing the prospect, I can see four reasons for pessimism and four optimism.

The reasons for pessimism are:

1. The disabilities of the World Bank.

The Bank has the severe disability of being powerful and highly centralised. I never cease to wonder at the extraordinary concentration of talent here in Washington and the relatively sparse scatter of Bank staff elsewhere around the world. This concentration and this power make it exceptionally difficult for the Bank to be in realistic touch with what is going on among poor people.

2. The like-minded.

Those of us who meet on occasions like this are a like-minded minority. I have written down here words to describe the large mass of Bank staff and others who could have come and who have not come. But 'lumpen intelligentsia', is a bit harsh, and have decided for diplomatic reasons not to use it. The effect of our meeting together can, though, be that we imagine that there is more consensus than really exists.

3. Signals

How much commitment really is there? We have been told that the sum of \$5 million which was to be dedicated to participation has been reduced to only \$2 million. If this is correct then it is a dismal signal in an institution where signals of this sort mean so much. If there is real commitment to participation in the Bank, then surely signals in the form of money available should be more positive than this.

4. Premature triumphalism.

I thought on the first day that we were in danger of celebrating a victory which had not yet occurred, somewhat like the Labour Party in the famous Sheffield rally, a week before the last General Election in the UK which they lost. There is a long way to go and the changes implied by the Learning Group's statement are deep and difficult.

The four reasons for being optimistic are:

1. The paradigm shift.

Elsewhere in the world as well as in the Bank, a massive paradigm shift is taking place, in ideas about development and the organisation of human society. Some of this is summed up in the 3Ds - Decentralisation, Democracy and Diversity. This shift is pervasive in post-modern thinking, in ideas about the nature of science, in management practices (where one has only to think of Tom Peters' Thriving on Chaos and Liberation Management, in development practice with the shift from blueprint to process, and in theory in all these domains. These changes are occurring outside the Bank, as well as to some extent inside it, and are surely going to influence directions of change.

2. Capacity to change.

The Bank over the past few years has shown a much greater capacity for self criticism and for change than most outside observers would have expected. Two examples can suffice. First the Wapenhans Report is a remarkable document for its critical vision and practical implications, some of which have already been followed through into practice. Second, the Bank's emphasis on transparency puts others to shame. The Emperor it seems can go naked or at least wear see throughs, while the bilaterals and NGO courtiers feel the need to remain fully clothed.

3. Decentralisation.

I understand that radical decentralisation is being considered in the Bank, moving staff out of Washington and into country and regional offices. This would be a move in the right direction and could be reinforced by more local staff and by staffing up in disciplines other than economists, recognising the need for a different balance with the shift from things and infrastructure to people and capabilities.

4. The participation learning group.

The numbers of people associated with this and the practical applications of participation within the Bank have been multiplying. The volume of work and thinking and experience analysed is impressive. The source book on participation in its drafts already represents a major achievement.

All these are reasons for cautious optimism but the challenges are formidable. I shall touch on three - the 3Ps - the poor, power and the personal.

1. THE POOR

There is always the danger that the latest focus of attention will leave behind those which have been pre-eminent earlier. As Lewis Preston has stressed in his much quoted statement, "the reduction of poverty is central to the purpose of the Bank". A good step forward has been taken in the definition of primary stake holders, which now includes not just "beneficiaries" (which begs the question whether people benefit or not) but explicitly those who are adversely affected by policies and projects. This I am sure is in part a tribute to those within the Bank who have been working on displacement of population and resettlement, and who have been responsible for the Bank's enlightened policy and many statements on a fair deal for those who otherwise would be losers. It is good that the question "who gains and who loses?" is now sharply on the agenda.

The participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) are also an exciting and important innovation. Much remains to be learnt about how they can best be carried out, but early indications are promising. They suggest that there are policy implications which may not cost much to implement, which are not revealed by normal survey methods. To take one example, in Zambia, the PPA using participatory rural appraisal methods, has found (which was well enough known no doubt to rural people) that the most difficult time of year is in the middle of the rains, which coincides not only with sickness, heavy work and debt, but also with the high expenditures of Christmas and of the need to pay annual school fees. The obvious implication is that poor people might be better off if some administrative measure could be found for deferring the payment of school fees until they are better able to pay. In general, the PPAs are raising the question, which needs to be asked again and again, "whose reality counts?". Our realities as outsider professionals sitting in Washington or in other urban centres in the North? Or their realities, as poor people in rural areas and slums in the South?

The challenge here is awareness and imagination. Those in powerful positions do not realise the way in which their actions and questions can spread and be amplified downwards to have bad effects. A World Bank Board Member's question about slow disbursement, which then gets translated into signals running through the Bank, may adversely effect hundreds of thousands of people through the pressure to spend money. For it may be spent badly at the cost of participation, local control, and benefits to the poorer. Participation under pressure penalises the poor. If only those in power would realise this, the development record for poor people would be much better.

2. POWER

The world can be understood (Figure 1) as patterned as a magnetic field with North-South magnets one above the other. These can be described as Uppers and Loweres. So we have the World Bank very near the top, exercising a powerful magnetic field and influencing much below it. A World Bank staff member goes on mission and is dominant in his (most of them are men) relationships with senior civil servants; they in turn dominate and are impatient with their subordinates; their subordinates go home in the evening (they are still men) and are cross with their wives, who bawl out the children; and the children go out and throw stones at the dog. Many people are multiple Uppers - senior, old, male, white, highly educated, highly paid and in central places and many are multiple Loweres - junior, young female, black, with less education, poorly paid and in peripheral places. These dominant - subordinate relationships are one pervasive pattern in our social life.

There are many damaging implications. One is that "All power deceives". The more powerful people are (and this applies especially in the Bank) and less participatory their approaches, the more likely they are to be deceived through deference, prudence and courtesy. People in powerful positions also fear the loss of control, but loss of control is essential for participation. There is a telling sentence in the account by the Task Manager, Bachir Souhlal, on the Matruh Bedouin Project, in one of the documents for the source book. "Through participation we lost "control" of the project and in doing so gained ownership and sustainability, precious things in our business". We have to realise that empowerment, which I believe is not yet a favourite word in the Bank - that empowerment for Lowers is also liberation for Uppers, that in dis-empowering ourselves and trusting others there is relief, satisfaction and sustainability. There are the watch words used in participatory rural appraisal - "handing over the stick" and "they can do it". These imply reversing the magnetic fields, making it possible as in the diagram (Figure 2) for magnets to spin, to learn laterally, from below and from above, with a freedom of orientation denied by normal Top-Down, North-South, Upper-Lower dominance.

The personal satisfactions of handing over the stick, of believing that they can do it, of trusting people, are immense, but very different from those of centralised power and control. One of the satisfactions is that when a Task Manager is lying on her or his death bed - though of course I hope that all Task Managers will live to a good old age - it will be possible to think back to projects which have been sustainable and which are going on and will continue to go on in their good effects long after the former Task Manager has departed this world. A priority here is to enable more and more Task Managers and others to understand these satisfactions. They entail taking risks, being criticised sometimes within the Bank, making mistakes, failing forwards, and in order to do a good job for the poor.

The challenge then is to weaken and reverse these magnetic fields. It is not to do a complete flip, which is revolutionary - as with Robespierre, Lenin, Mao and Mengistu - which is repeating the same paradigm the other way up, but to enter a new participatory paradigm of greater equity, freedom and choice.

3. PERSONAL - BEHAVIOUR, ATTITUDES AND COMMITMENT

Personal behaviour, attitudes and commitment are so central to good development practice, that they have been largely ignored. It is bizarre that psychologists, management trainers, and especially psychotherapists have not been a prominent part of the development scene. For if we - the powerful - were to change, almost everything about development would change. Similarly, if we do not change, not much will change.

Let me quote Yaclov Havel from one of the documents before us. "It is not that we should simply seek new and better ways of managing society, the economy and the world. The point is that we should fundamentally change the way we behave".

Strikingly, when I asked Gunilla Olsson what she felt should be in my remarks, she came up with precisely the same three items, all relating to behaviour, attitudes and commitment, that I was thinking off.

(1) RECRUITMENT

Recruitment has three aspects:

(i) Disciplinary Mix.

ODA now has at least 18 social development advisers and the ratio of social development adviser to economists is roughly 1 to 3. The Bank as I understand it has only slightly more than 20 sociologists or social anthropologists working in a professional capacity and yet has a staff of economists running into the thousands. In terms of disciplinary mix, there is a long, long way to go. If the Bank is serious about people being the priority, and not things - the physical world, infrastructure and so on - which came first in the early days when the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, then it must staff accordingly. It is profoundly disabling for the Bank to be as dominated as it is by the dogma and values of economists. This is not to denigrate economists and the huge contribution which they have made and will continue to make. It is to appeal for balance.

(ii) Commitment and Character.

It is just not discipline but values and the sort of person that matter. Many PhD's straight out of University have just suffered experiences which handicap them for life. As far as I know the Bank does not have a rehabilitation programme for such unfortunate people, although they are quite extensively recruited. At the same time there is no reason why an economist, a plant pathologist, a civil engineer, a micro biologist or any other specialist should not be able to relate in a participatory way and to be oriented towards the poor. The challenge is to ensure that the recruitment process is sensitive to these qualities, so that over the years the Bank is progressively staffed up with people who can and will live and work in a participatory mode.

(iii) - Who Recruits?

Moving backwards one step up the chain, the key question is who recruits. As far as I know there is no one here from Personnel. Yet, those in Personnel who are responsible for recruiting are perhaps the most important people from this point of view. What sort of people are they? What are their values? What are their criteria? Besides skills mix and gender mix (which does not seem to have received the priority it deserves) what attention when recruiting do they give to personality, to values, to commitment, to ability to work in a participatory mode?

2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Changes in behaviour, attitudes and commitment can come through experiential learning. There is an excellent proposal in the Report that Bank staff should be able to take 3 month sabbaticals with NGOs around the world. Beyond that it would help if Bank staff could have unconstrained exposure to living for short periods in villages and interacting with and learning from poor people. GTZ supports a programme called Exposure and Dialogue (initiated by Karl Osner) which enables senior aid staff and politicians to spend time face to face with poor people, learning about the life histories and problems of poor people and then reflecting on these. Each exposure dialogue takes about 12 days. It is reported to be a remarkable and sometimes transforming experience. Something like this ought to be available to Bank staff. There are costs to the hosts of inviting foreigners and making all the arrangements but the long term benefits for the poor in general could and should be high.

In May last year, there was a one day Workshop on training for Bank staff. Many suggestions were made at that Workshop which I had the privilege of attending. Some of these were incorporated in the Minutes which I later received. Almost no action seems to have followed. Does this mean that the Bank attaches low priority to training and to reorientation? If it does, then I should add this as a powerful fifth factor in the list of reasons for being pessimistic. If on the other hand this is just a temporary delay, there are many, many things that could and should be done. Again, as with recruitment, the questions is who trains? Does the Bank have suitable training staff for experiential learning? Are the approaches to training themselves participatory? Who determines training policy? And perhaps as important as any of these, who recruits the trainers and according to what criteria?

3. ENVIRONMENT, INCENTIVES AND REWARDS

This is a hoary chestnut in the sense that the issue of the Bank's culture, incentives and rewards for staff have been raised as issues again, and again, and again. In my experience Bank staff always agree that something is wrong and that major change is needed: that the incentives and rewards are for large-scale and quick disbursements, that those who are promoted are those who move most money and so on, and yet little seems to change.

It is encouraging though that the rules for disbursement and procurement are being changed to make them less inimical to participation. We all know that pressures to spend kill participation and discriminate against the poor. We all know that competitive tendering makes no sense in many rural conditions. We all know that the legal framework within which the Bank operates is itself part of the problem. The need and challenge are to reverse the logic: to start with the poor people, with rural communities and with slums, and let their reality determine the rules.

The culture and incentives of the Bank have been resistant to change. Is a high powered, high-level authoritative review, both analytical and practical in its recommendations, required? Could there be a Wapenhans Report for the culture, procedures, incentives and rewards of the Bank?

WHAT NEXT?

What the Bank faces now is perhaps the greatest challenge in its history. It is a challenge to change its logic, to see things the other way round, and for its actions to be determined not by the habitual reflexes of professionals but by the realities of the poor. The Report of the Participatory Learning Group presents the opportunity. The question is whether the Board and the Management of the Bank will recognise its implications and seize the opportunity. The implications are a new participatory style of management within the Bank itself. Perhaps this requires a participatory action management team. Perhaps it requires that senior management themselves reflect on and experience some of the other realities - not only those of the poor, but those of current North American business practice with its stress on decentralisation, trust, rapid adaptation, failing forwards, and diversity. Sven Sandstrom put it succinctly. Participation, he said, "is the right way of doing business". We are talking of a new professionalism. The first step is to recognise the errors and limitations of the constraining old professionalism. The second step is to learn about and to embrace and practice new ways of doing things, which are more participatory. All this is exciting and makes it a good time to be alive. In many different domains of activity and management, participation is becoming the mode. In participatory rural appraisal, which is but one of these,

poor people (who are in many ways Lowers) have shown extraordinary abilities to do things and to carry out forms of analyses of which we thought they were incapable. Perhaps this is true in all Upper-Lower, North-South relationships. The spirit of the Wapenhans Report, of what one could call "ownership for Lowers", applies in all these relationships. The Bank has shown a lead in these reversals, and we look to it now to show many more.

The context of these changes is itself changing. The world is shrinking. We used, 10-15 years ago to talk of the global village as a novel idea. But the village has shrunk. We are all much closer together and much more interlinked than we used to be. We are now a global family in a global bed. There is the saying of the family all in the same bed, that "When father turns, we all turn". Perhaps I maybe forgiven for noting that the patriarchal imagery may fit the Bank. Greater forgiveness will be needed for the following:

The global village had its day
but gradually has shrunk away.
until we find ourselves instead
together in a global bed.

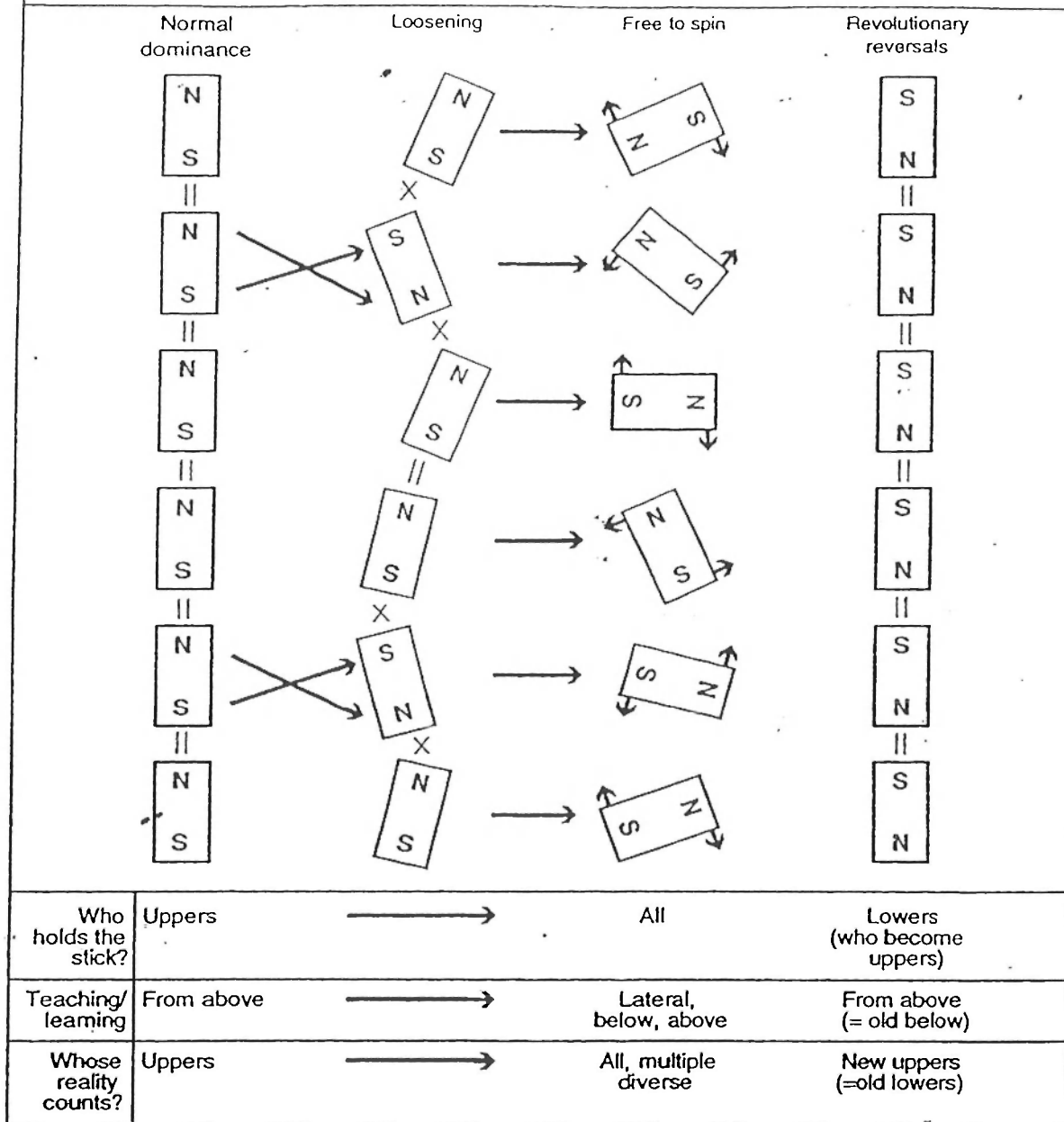
Enjoying patriarchal rank
we know our father is the Bank
and we the family must learn
when father turns, so we all turn

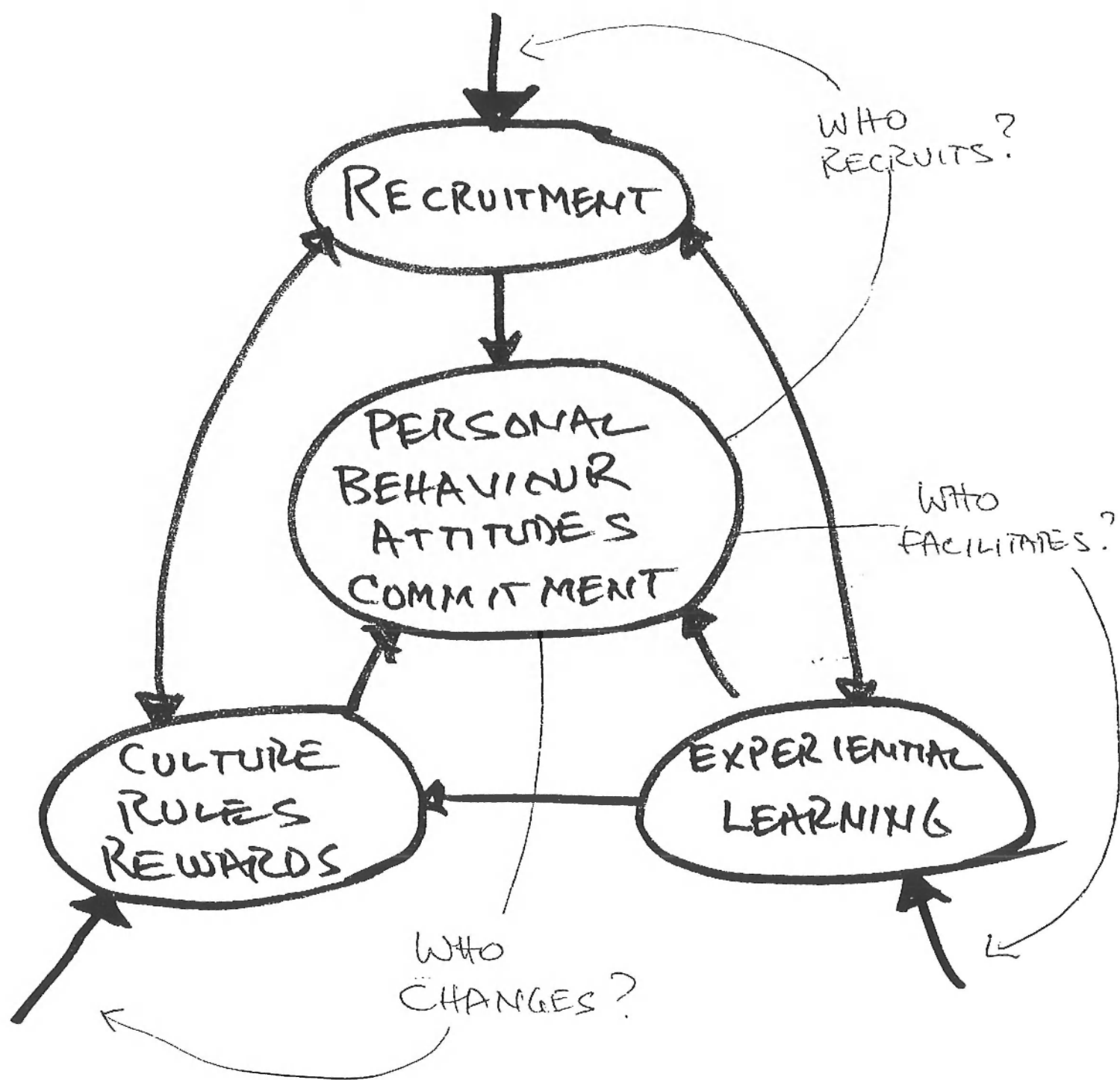
It's hard for father with his weight
he needs to turn before too late
Stakeholders all, let's seize on fate
and prod him to participate

What the World Bank says and does, the signals it sends out, the criteria it adopts, the way its staff behave on mission - these matter to us all. Already the Bank has pioneered on the social side with the rules about resettlement and those adversely affected by development actions, and with the participatory poverty assessments. There is also a huge negative balance with adverse affects of structural adjustments and other policies. But let us look on the bright side. The Bank has shown that it is capable of vision and change. Two years ago, at the participatory learning workshop, it seemed right to call for guts and vision on the part of the learning group. They have shown that. It is now a question of the guts and vision of Senior Management. Many of us are watching that space. So much depends on what they decide and how they act. To the participatory learning group and to all those within the Bank who are working for participatory change, I am sure all of us who have been invited here from outside, would wish to say "Go to it, and good luck".

ROBERT CHAMBERS

Figure 1: Dominance, reversals and freedom





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seem to have received the priority it deserves) what attention when recruiting do they give to personality, to values, to commitment, to ability to work in a participatory mode?

2. EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Changes in behaviour, attitudes and commitment can come through experiential learning. There is an excellent proposal in the Report that Bank staff should be able to take 3 month sabbaticals with NGOs around the world. Beyond that it would help if Bank staff could have unconstrained exposure to living for short periods in villages and interacting with and learning from poor people. GTZ supports a programme called Exposure and Dialogue (initiated by Karl Osner) which enables senior aid staff and politicians to spend time face to face with poor people, learning about the life histories and problems of poor people and then reflecting on these. Each exposure dialogue takes about 12 days. It is reported to be a remarkable and sometimes transforming experience. Something like this ought to be available to Bank staff. There are costs to the hosts of inviting foreigners and making all the arrangements but the long term benefits for the poor in general could and should be high.

In May last year, there was a one day Workshop on training for Bank staff. Many suggestions were made at that Workshop which I had the privilege of attending. Some of these were incorporated in the Minutes which I later received. Almost no action seems to have followed. Does this mean that the Bank attaches low priority to training and to reorientation? If it does, then I should add this as a powerful fifth factor in the list of reasons for being pessimistic. If on the other hand this is just a temporary delay, there are many, many things that could and should be done. Again, as with recruitment, the question is who trains? Does the Bank have suitable training staff for experiential learning? Are the approaches to training themselves participatory? Who determines training policy? And perhaps as important as any of these, who recruits the trainers and according to what criteria?

3. ENVIRONMENT, INCENTIVES AND REWARDS

This is a hoary chestnut in the sense that the issue of the Bank's culture, incentives and rewards for staff have been raised as issues again, and again, and again. In my experience Bank staff always agree that something is wrong and that major change is needed: that the incentives and rewards are for large-scale and quick disbursements, that those who are promoted are those who move most money and so on, and yet little seems to change.

It is encouraging though that the rules for disbursement and procurement are being changed to make them less inimical to participation. We all know that pressures to spend kill participation and discriminate against the poor. We all know that competitive tendering makes no sense in many rural conditions. We all know that the legal framework within which the Bank operates is itself part of the problem. The need and challenge are to reverse the logic: to start with the poor people, with rural communities and with slums, and let their reality determine the rules.

The culture and incentives of the Bank have been resistant to change. Is a high powered, high-level authoritative review, both analytical and practical in its recommendations, required? Could there be a Wapenhans Report for the culture, procedures, incentives and rewards of the Bank?

WHAT NEXT?

What the Bank faces now is perhaps the greatest challenge in its history. It is a challenge to change its logic, to see things the other way round, and for its actions to be determined not by the habitual reflexes of professionals but by the realities of the poor. The Report of the Participatory Learning Group presents the opportunity. The question is whether the Board and the Management of the Bank will recognise its implications and seize the opportunity. The implications are a new participatory style of management within the Bank itself. Perhaps this requires a participatory action management team. Perhaps it requires that senior management themselves reflect on and experience some of the other realities - not only those of the poor, but those of current North American business practice with its stress on decentralisation, trust, rapid adaptation, failing forwards, and diversity. Sven Sandstrom put it succinctly. Participation, he said, "is the right way of doing business". We are talking of a new professionalism. The first step is to recognise the errors and limitations of the constraining old professionalism. The second step is to learn about and to embrace and practice new ways of doing things, which are more participatory. All this is exciting and makes it a good time to be alive. In many different domains of activity and management, participation is becoming the mode. In participatory rural appraisal, which is but one of these, poor people (who are in many ways Lowers) have shown extraordinary abilities to do things and to carry out forms of analyses of which we thought they were incapable. Perhaps this is true in all Upper-Lower, North-South relationships. The spirit of the Wapenhans Report, of what one could call "ownership for Lowers", applies in all these relationships. The Bank has shown a lead in these reversals, and we look to it now to show many more.

The context of these changes is itself changing. The world is shrinking. We used, 10-15 years ago to talk of the global village as a novel idea. But the village has shrunk. We are all much closer together and much more interlinked than we used to be. We are now a global family in a global bed. There is the saying of the family all in the same bed, that "When father turns, we all turn". Perhaps I maybe forgiven for noting that the patriarchal imagery may fit the Bank. Greater forgiveness will be needed for the following:

The global village had its day
but gradually has shrunk away.
until we find ourselves instead
together in a global bed.

Enjoying patriarchal rank
we know our father is the Bank
and we the family must learn
when father turns, so we all turn

It's hard for father with his weight
we hope he'll turn before too late
Stakeholders all, let's seize on fate
and prod him to participate

What the World Bank says and does, the signals it sends out, the criteria it adopts, the way its staff behave on mission - these matter to us all. Already the Bank has pioneered on the social side with the rules about resettlement and those adversely affected by development actions, and with the participatory poverty assessments. There is also a huge negative balance with adverse affects of structural adjustments and other policies. But let us look on the bright side. The Bank has shown that it is capable of vision and change. Two years ago, at the participatory learning workshop, it seemed right to call for guts and vision on the part of the learning group. They have shown that. It is now a question of the guts and vision of Senior Management. Many of us are watching that space. So much depends on what they decide and how they act. To the participatory learning group and to all those within the Bank who are working for participatory change, I am sure all of us who have been invited here from outside, would wish to say "Go to it, and good luck".

ROBERT CHAMBERS

Figure 1: Dominance, reversals and freedom

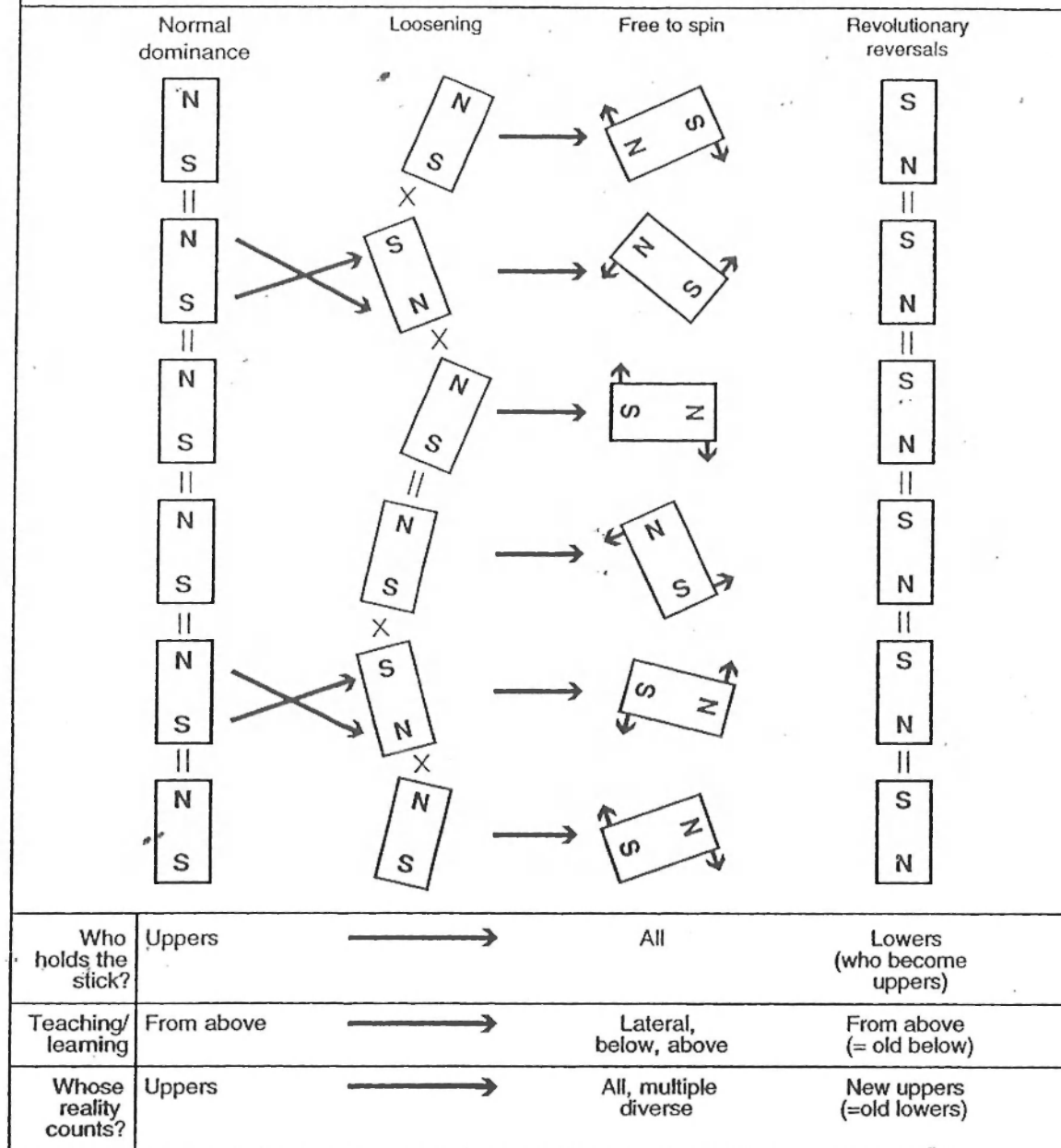


FIGURE 2 THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSONAL

